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ABSTRACT

The concept of "frame of reference" offers a perspective from which to examine the many factors which affect advertising response. The advertiser is interested in affecting two types of overt behavior. First, the individual is induced to select a particular stimulus (the advertisement) from competing stimuli (such as other people, noise, and other ads). The advertiser must attract attention away from such competition while delivering the message clearly. Secondly, the advertiser seeks to affect the behavior intended by the ad (writing your congressman, picking up a pack of gum). The advertisement is no longer present in the external field, but its message is remembered and considered relevant enough to lead to the intended form of action. (JF)

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WHAT FACTORS AFFECT RESPONSE TO ADS?
- A Perspective -

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Working Paper

WHAT FACTORS AFFECT RESPONSE TO ADS?

- A Perspective -

"What advertising does to people
is not nearly so important as
what people do to advertising."

- Anonymous

Legendary advertising man James Webb Young is supposed to have offered the advice, "Early to bed. Early to rise. Work like hell. And Advertise." Obviously many have followed his guidance. Yet the debate over how to advertise, and what happens as a result of that advertising is not a great deal closer to resolution than it was in the days of epic practitioners such as Young.

Obviously the assumptions about advertising response made by many critics are different from those held by (say) General Foods or Procter and Gamble. To risk oversimplification, the critics generally assume that an outside force (advertising) has considerable influence in shaping the responses of a more or less passive consuming public. Supporters, on the other hand, often seem to assume something akin to the model of "deliberate and calculating" man asserted in the philosophy of "classical liberalism." Here the advertisement is accepted, rejected, or allowed some limited influence, dependent primarily on the "reasoning" factors at work in the consumer's mind.

To push this matter a bit further, it may be wise to remember that we should be extremely wary about discussing "advertisements" in an unqualified sense at all. There are obviously many advertisements, destined

to serve many purposes, through many media, in search of many audiences, etc. Next, consider the premise that in order to begin any reasonable understanding about the factors that affect the response to "ads," it might be better to begin with the question: WHAT FACTORS AFFECT THE RESPONSES OF INDIVIDUALS TO ANYTHING? Or, to put it another way, in order to understand the response of individuals to a small part of their environments (advertisements), we are better off attempting to grasp something about how people respond to their environments per se. This is, of course, a deductive approach to the subject area.

A useful starting point is provided by a set of twelve psychological propositions - "a minimum set of broadly stated generalizations based on established findings" - compiled and analyzed by social psychologists Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif.¹ It may prove useful to begin with what might be considered a "master" proposition and then integrate some of the most relevant of the others into its parts. In the process, it is possible to offer a somewhat different and potentially useful perspective for the workings of those omnipresent, fascinating, frustrating and complex phenomena - advertising messages.

THE "WHOLE" OF THE PARTS - THE "FRAME OF REFERENCE"

Formally stated, the idea of the "frame of reference" is: "Psychological processing is patterned, as jointly determined by operating internal and external forces, whether consciously experienced or not." Now, what does that mean?

Let's begin with behavior, specifically the type of behavior

¹Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif, Social Psychology, New York: Harper & Row, 1969, Chs. 2-4.

that can be observed - in other words, "overt" behavior.

OB

Somebody does something. They wink. Raise a hand. Talk. Walk away. Read a book. Look at an ad, Buy a product. Keep in mind this is meant to be a behavior occurring at a given moment in time, not a general pattern of behavior. Now, what leads to that "overt behavior?"

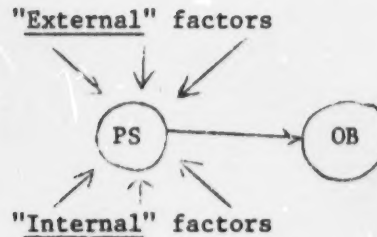


The behavior, as interpreted by the Sherifs, proceeds from psychological structuring ("PS") taking place within the individual at that given moment in time. As the proposition states, this structuring is "patterned" - that is, it represents an order for that individual processing a particular set of stimuli, at that particular moment. This, of course, helps explain why we sometimes have a difficult time explaining a particular action of ours to others. After all, it was our "order" at that particular moment in time given that particular set of stimuli. As Don Fabun puts it:

Many of our problems in communication arise because we forget to remember that individual experiences are never identical.²

Now, what are some of those stimuli that determine the psychological structure at any moment? Think of them in terms of your behavior.

²Don Fabun, Communications: The Transfer of Meaning, Beverly Hills: The Glencoe Press, 1968, p.8.



External factors are, predictably, those things going on outside of you at any given moment. For example, whether or not there are other people present, and who those other people are; where you are; the weather perhaps; the kind of physical objects around you; the general state of the environment - e.g., whether it's noisy or quiet; what kinds of things are there for you to pay attention to - e.g., ads. And so on.

Internal factors are all those things going on inside you at the same moment. Your past experiences, for example; your "attitudes" about different things; the state of your health at the moment - are you seeing clearly, distracted by a headache, etc.; all of that "psychological baggage" that are called "beliefs," "opinions," and so on.

Now, these internal and external factors are "processed" by you from moment to moment, and they result in different behaviors depending on the psychological structure - the "order" that you have given those elements ("whether consciously experienced or not") right then.

A few examples may prove useful.

. An individual is attending a basketball game. At one moment he's silent for an opening prayer or some special memorial occasion. At the next, he's straining his lungs and throat cheering on

his team. The setting is the same. Yet, the behavior that he's learned (internal) is "appropriate" is different depending on the (external) cues he's given - chaplain on the floor, players on the floor.

. A student is sitting in a class, and somehow feels like taking part in the discussion. Why the hand in the air (overt behavior) now? Possibly because of a combination of what was said, by whom (external), with her knowledge/opinion on the subject, and some confidence in the strength of her stand (internal).

. A person is with a group of people he's trying to impress. Someone brings up the name of someone he knows and the group responds negatively. He feels obliged to say something biting as well. Later, by himself, he feels guilty for that earlier behavior. His behavior now, under far less anxious social circumstances, could be quite different. The presence of those important others (external) was a dominant factor overcoming his actual feelings and knowledge of the individual (internal).

. A student is sitting in her room trying to study. The radio is on. Suddenly she's aware of an advertisement for Mother's Day. The external stimulus (the ad) activated her knowledge (internal) and guilt (internal) that Mother's Day was almost here and that she hadn't done anything about it. Yet, the radio had been on for some time without her becoming consciously aware of any of the dozens of ads that preceded this one.

. A television commercial is shown as part of a class. The class members laugh at (say) the preoccupation with giving "personality" to

a chewing gum. Yet, most have seen the ad dozens of times before as they watched television, and never burst into laughter. They may have even bought the gum. Why the different reactions? The presence of classmates (external) and the unnatural setting for a television commercial of the classroom (external) as well as the desire to be "one of the gang" (internal), are the dominant differences in the "psychological structures" present at each of those moments.

. A woman is asked by an interviewer which television commercials she dislikes. She mentions the familiar (all too familiar) message of a headache remedy. During her next trip to the store she purchases the same product. In the first case, a dominant external element (the interviewer) and her positive appraisal of the overall situation ("Asking for my opinion") led to her response. In the second, anticipating a future headache (internal) she buys the product based on the remembered advertised claims for fast relief. The environmental situation in this instance (the supermarket) is dominated by real, pragmatic, dollars-and-cents choices rather than the earlier offering of a of a presumably acceptable (and low-risk) opinion to a stranger.

Now, keeping the overall concept of the "frame of reference" in mind, it may prove useful to examine some of the other important propositions. Each offers additional insight into the effect of "internal" and "external" forces at work on the individual at any given moment. Each offers potential insight into the complexities of advertising response.

Ongoing psychological activity is selective. Most of us, at one time or another, have found ourselves saying, "Why can't you see things the way I do?" The answer, of course, is simple. Because they're not you.

From moment to moment each of us is engulfed in a virtually infinite number of stimuli, both internal and external. To retain our sanity we cannot possibly pay equal attention to all of them. Therefore, both consciously and unconsciously, each of us is constantly selecting some things out of those internal and external factors to attend to, act upon, etc., and ignoring the others.

Now, what helps us determine what we are "selective" to and what we choose to screen out? As the frame of reference suggests, our "screening" may vary from moment to moment because of operating internal and/or external factors. We pay attention to a stop sign. We pay attention to the pain in our elbow. We look at this ad because it is interesting, another because it is loud, but we ignore the next because we are distracted by a conversation. And so on.

Over a period of time (i.e., "ongoing"), our selectivity does begin to develop patterns. That is, we are more likely to be selective to some things rather than others, although it is always possible that at any given moment our "normal" selectivity may be aborted. (I normally screen out water heater ads. I'm simply not aware of them. When my water heater broke down, however, I became quite aware of all that were around.)

Of course some of the selectivity we develop is determined by that "psychological baggage" of attitudes, beliefs, opinions, past experiences, etc., etc. Charles Schultz's "Peanuts" characters provide an apt illustration. Lucy, Linus, and Charlie Brown are lying on their backs on a grassy slope looking at the clouds.

LUCY: "If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud formations. . .What do you think you see, Linus?"

LINUS: "Well, those clouds up there look to me like the map of the British Honduras on the Caribbean... that cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor..... and that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen.....I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side...."

LUCY: "Uh huh....that's very good...What do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?"

CHARLIE BROWN: "Well, I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsey, but I changed my mind!"

Another example suggests how what's "natural" can be so subtly shaped by our culture.

If we were to walk down the streets of any large Indian city we would be apt to see a Hindu peasant. If we were to observe him blow the mucus from his nose into the air and onto the street, the act would probably appear to most of us as filthy and revolting. To the Hindu -- exposed to a cleanliness training far more exacting if different than ours -- our habit of wrapping up our nasal discharges in pieces of cloth, which we then carry around with us, and with which we later wipe our faces, appears filthy and disgusting with an equivalent phenomenal absoluteness...³

Obviously, then, the selectivity of our ongoing psychological activity is crucial to the understanding of individuals' responses to advertising.

Consider, for example, that the exposure to communications media tends to be voluntary and selective. It is voluntary in the sense that the person intentionally exposes himself to the medium. He turns the TV set on and tunes in particular programs or he purposely reads certain magazines and newspapers. It is selective in that he chooses only a fraction of all media available, and different people choose different things. The choices he makes, the programs, the magazines, the articles, the features he exposes himself to, are

³M. H. Segall, D. T. Campbell, M. J. Herskovitz, The Influence of Culture on Visual Perception, New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966, pp. 13-14. (Emphasis added.)

often likely to be those that gratify his expectations and that are compatible with his existing attitudes and opinions.

Whereas exposure to media tends to be voluntary, exposure to much advertising is involuntary; that is, the person does not usually seek the advertisements. The ads "come along with" the program or editorial content, and one becomes involuntarily exposed to the ads as a result of his voluntary exposure to the medium. Exceptions, of course, are exposures to classified ads, to the "yellow pages," to mail-order catalogs, and to regular sources of shopping information, such as grocery store and department store ads.

Even given this frequent involuntary exposure (we turn a page and confront an ad), there is abundant evidence that our psychological selectivity works to screen out much of the advertising that we could "see." It is, for example, a well established research finding that people who already use an advertised product are more likely to perceive an advertisement for that brand than those who do not use it. This may (particularly in the case of "high risk" products such as cars) be a way of seeking confirmation for the purchase decision. It may also simply be a matter of feeling more "comfortable" with the product in general, including its advertising. This "reinforcement" selectivity also affects us in relation to product classes. Thus, cigarette smokers are far more likely to read cigarette ads than non-smokers and (to the despair of anti-smoking groups) the most likely audience for a message on the evils of smoking is non-smokers.

Our ongoing psychological activities can affect how we perceive the products and services themselves. Thus, even though a student may never have visited a particular campus bar, he "knows" he wouldn't like it there because of what he's "heard." And if he attends a performance of a new rock group

that is the rave choice of all the "right" people, it is quite likely that he will find their offerings irresistible. Obviously, this phenomenon is of considerable interest to advertisers. In research conducted by Anheuser-Busch, subjects were first classified by their reasons for drinking - e.g., the "social drinkers," the "reparative" drinker, and so on. They were then exposed to four presumably new beers with fictitious names (Bix, Zim, Waz and Biv) and were then shown television commercials in "storyboard" form, each depicting one of the beers being consumed by an individual whose personality fit one of the stereo-
types based on reasons for drinking. The results should not surprise you.

What the subjects didn't realize was that the beers were identical. "The percentage that chose the brand corresponding to their personality type was much larger than one would expect. . . Furthermore, all the subjects believed the brands were different and that they could tell the differences between them. Most felt that at least one of the four brands was not fit for human consumption."⁴

Thus, the frame of reference of any given moment is determined in part by the selective nature of ongoing psychological activity. Each of us perceives (and acts) somewhat differently than everyone else, and this screening clearly affects the potential for advertising response. Yet, obviously there are perceptions and actions that we seem to hold in common. The next proposition begins to clarify why.

The psychological tendency is toward patterning of experience.

In the late '60s and early '70s it was not uncommon for college teachers to be asked by students to be less "formal" in their approach to the subject matter. Thus, we were encouraged to abandon lectures for "rap" sessions, regularly scheduled tests for more informal evaluations, etc. Yet the freedom seemed to wear thin. Before too long, students began to ask, "What are we

⁴Advertising Age, June 23, 1975, p. 17.

supposed to be reading?" "How much will we be expected to know?" "How will you determine our grades?" etc. Simply, it is apparently not in the psychological make-up of humans to wish to experience prolonged instability - a loosening of "patterns."

Of course we all know this from common experience. Even the freest of the free spirits among us fills his or her life with patterns - getting up about the same time, following the same order of getting dressed, taking the same routes to familiar places, encountering only a certain limited number of friends, seeing certain types of movies, approving (or disapproving) of certain kinds of religious, political, social activity, etc.

As suggested in the discussion of psychological selectivity, these "patterns" have a significant effect on the types of stimuli we are likely to be selective to -- often the familiar, the comfortable, the non-threatening. Obviously, this is a factor that advertisers earnestly wish to have working for them. "Brand images," for example, can be seen as "patterns" that individuals have developed about specific brands of products or services. The advertising practitioner most frequently associated with this determined effort to induce positive patterning is David Ogilvy. His statements on the subject have become "classic" - equally applicable and pertinent today as they were decades ago.

Every advertisement must be considered as a contribution to the complex symbol which is the brand image -- as part of the long-term investment in the reputation of the brand.

What a miracle it is when a manufacturer manages to sustain a coherent image in his advertising over a period of years.....What guts it takes, what obstinate determination to stick to one coherent policy year after year in the face of all the pressures to "come up with something new" every six months.

But what golden rewards await the advertiser who has the brains to create a favorable brand image -- and to stick with it over a long period. Look at Campbell's Soup! Look at Jell-O! Look at Betty Crocker! Look at Esso! Look at Ivory Soap!

The men who have been responsible for the advertising of these immortal brands have understood that every advertisement, every radio program, every TV commercial is not a one-time shot, but a long-term investment on the total personality of their brands.⁵

This potential of advertising for creating and sustaining patterns of thought and action is at the heart of many critics' contention that advertising restricts competition. By developing brand "images" through heavy advertising, they contend, large companies are able to restrict competition by making it difficult for new entrants to dislodge these influential patterns.

Not so, claim the supporters. Try though we may, the consumer is fickle. And though the patterns may remain relatively firm for a product class -- e.g., beer drinkers are likely to remain beer drinkers -- brand loyalty within the product class can be quite transient indeed, and many well advertised brands fail. As usual, there is merit (i.e., structure) in the arguments of all sides.

Whenever well-established pattern is challenged, advertisers face a particularly risky frame-of-reference. By way of example, for many years housewives thought that the most effective laundry soaps or detergents were those that produced the most suds - the more suds the better the presumed cleaning action. When the Monsanto Chemical Company introduced "All," a low-sudsing detergent, their advertising attempted to help housewives reduce the dissonance resulting from the conflicting concept by offering a rational explanation of low-sudsing effectiveness, showing convincing demonstrations, getting washing machine manufacturers to endorse the product, and giving away samples for home trial. This was an apparently successful attempt to alter patterns. The extraordinarily well financed effort directed toward changing the skirt preference

⁵David Ogilvy, "The Image and the Brand: A New Approach to Creative Operations," (Speech before the Central Region, American Association of Advertising Agencies, October 14, 1955.)

patterns of American women from "mini" to "midi" was not.

So when our actions lead us to prefer the sure to the uncertain, the "old reliable" to the new, the predictable (if unexciting) restaurant franchise to the untested (but potentially interesting) roadside eatery, our frame of reference may have been dominated by the psychological tendency toward patterning of experience. As discussed, it proves a blessing or a bane for advertising response.

Structured stimulus situations set limits to alternatives in psychological patterning. The paper's opening quote asserted that what ads do to people is not nearly so important as what people do to ads. Certainly the concept of the frame-of-reference suggests that there are many more variables affecting perception and action in any given advertising situation than merely the ad itself. The ideas of the psychological fact of selectivity and the psychological tendency toward patterning, for example, suggest that variables within the individual are likely to play a major role in how (if at all) advertising is perceived and acted upon.

This proposition - and the next - examine the potential influence of a major external variable - the degree of "structure" in the stimuli (including ads) around us. A "structured" stimulus situation may be defined as one that is clear cut, has a definite pattern, is unambiguous, and so on. As a simple example, a drawing of a square is relatively "structured" compared to an ink blot. The stimulus situation of typical Protestant or Catholic church service is relatively structured while that of (say) the Quakers and many fundamentalist sects is not.

Now, the proposition suggests that whenever the external stimulus situation is relatively structured, the influence of internal factors (such as our

ability to "see what we want to see") will be lessened. If, for example, our favorite football team is simply demolished by the hated rivals, it is a relatively structured (i.e., unambiguous) situation. Thus, the potential of internal factors such as alibiing, distortion of official's calls, etc., is lessened. Now, consider the case with a game decided by one point. Ah, the opportunity for us to impose our pattern increases significantly. To use another example, a Walt Disney movie generally provides the "structure" in that stimulus situation. It typically has a beginning, middle, and end; good guys and bad guys. We may or may not like it, but the opportunity for each of us to pattern (recognize, interpret) it in our own ways is limited. Contrast this with Kubrick's "2001," Fellini, or Bergman. Here there may be as many different patterns imposed as there are viewers of the film. (Unless, of course, a significant critic does our patterning for us.) In sum, if the external factors in our frame of reference at any given moment are highly structured, the likely contribution of internal factors is diminished.

The implications for advertising response are significant. It would seem to follow from the proposition that whenever an ad is highly structured, the opportunity for us to interpret it via our internal factors is limited. Now, an advertising message that is relatively structured would be one that would have a clear, unambiguous message. A structured ad would possibly feature explicitly stated product/service characteristics and expectations. It would make clear what the message is and what action we're supposed to take as a result. Given this type of message then, the possibility of distortion via internal factors is presumably minimized.

The advantages of such an approach are fairly obvious. The small newspaper ad that headlines, "Hemorrhoid Sufferers" is likely to attract precisely

who is sought. The "trade" ad that cries "Now. A Profitable Line of Paperbacks for the Small Retailer," signals a particular target. We are all familiar with the so-called "slice of life" approach to broadcast commercials. These are simply mini-dramas occurring in the supermarket, kitchen, garage, picnic grove, or wherever. Typically, the problem is presented, the product introduced, and the problem resolved. There is little time for character development. These are also frequently the types of advertisements most subject to ridicule. Silly or dopey they may be, but highly structured they typically are. There's little guesswork about "What's going on," or nagging questions about what we are supposed to learn from the message. Mr. Whipple may seem sappy, but there's little chance for us to miss the sales story.

There are, of course, other responses to the highly structured message that are not so desirable. The straightforward message may discourage us from misinterpreting it but it may also limit its appeal. If we are not concerned primarily with the problems of overly waxy floors, the need for perfection in our morning coffee, or the assurance of masculinity in our cigarette, the highly structured message may be screened out. By its very nature it makes it clear from the outset what it's about and we may simply not be interested. If the message proclaims, "Wonder Bread Builds Strong Bodies 12 Ways," and we are not concerned with the nutritional qualities of bread (as compared with, say, its taste), then we may simply ignore the message. Thus, the advertiser utilizing a relatively structured message form runs the risk of limiting his potential audience. The potential customer recognizes the message due to its structure, but decides "That's not for me" because there is little room for injecting his or her own product criteria experiences into the picture.

With a highly structured ad message, then, alternatives in psychological

patterning (other than those intended by the advertiser) are limited, simply because the message imposes its clear-cut pattern on the stimulus situation. Whether or not we respond to that pattern (clear though it may be) is determined in large part by whether the advertiser's patterning of reality matches our own.

In unstructured stimulus situations, alternatives in psychological patterning are increased. For many of us, the most terrifying scene in the motion picture "Jaws" was not when Robert Shaw was being explicitly consumed by the Great White, but when the girl swimmer, at the very beginning, began to sense that something was going on below the surface of the water. We never saw the shark attack her, but the terror lay in our own interpretations of exactly what was befalling the hapless lady. With Shaw's death, the director imposed a structure and forced our patterning. With the swimmer's problems, the structure was suggested, but not imposed. We created the patterns in our own minds, and were all the more terrified by the personal nature of the experience.

Given the psychological tendency toward patterning of experience discussed earlier, and given an external stimulus situation that is not clearly structured, it follows that the patterning will tend to be added by internal factors. Thus, many reports on unidentified flying objects (U.F.O.s) have described them as "saucer" or "cigar" shaped, apparently as a result of imposing a known pattern (structure) on a subject (the flying object) which, to put it mildly, is unstructured, ambiguous, fluid, lacking clear definition, etc. The individual must bring the "pattern" to the ink blot, since it has no structure to make a pattern clear. Here, then, the interpretations tend to be subjective, varying from individual to individual, and so on. Exposed to Rembrandt's "Man in a Gold Helmet," we all see much the same thing. Exposed to a

Picasso, we may each have different ideas of the appropriate "pattern."

It follows, then, that relatively "unstructured" advertisements may be interpreted in different ways by different people. The "Un-Cola" campaign for 7-Up, for example, requires the individuals to "make sense" of many of the messages, to interject their own order, as does the extraordinarily expensive (\$250,000) Levis "trademark" effort. Many of the so-called "soft-sell" approaches used by perfumes, cosmetics, beers, liquors - and even some politicians - are deliberately designed to be ambiguous enough so that the individual can impose their own (hopefully positive) structure on the situation.

The advantages and disadvantages of such an approach should be evident. Basically, by allowing room for many interpretations, the advertiser increases the possibility of attracting a wide range of customers, each of whom could potentially find something in the message that could be patterned from their own experiences, etc. Also, to the extent that the effort of patterning is that of the individual, there is potentially a greater sense of achievement, "involvement" if you will, in having "closed" the message structure to some meaningful whole.

The potential pitfalls in response are due in part precisely to the "effort" required. Unless the reward for taking time to induce a pattern seems reasonable, the ad may simply be ignored. The mental question, "What's going on here?" may simply be answered, "Who cares?" Of course, if the individual supplies a pattern, it may not be the interpretation the advertiser wishes. Misinterpretation of advertising messages has been the downfall of many expensive advertising efforts.

Thus, the response to advertising messages may be influenced by the degree of structure of the advertising message. When the message is relatively structured, the "pattern" is already imposed and the chances for individual

for individual interpretation and patterning are diminished. This is the advertising approach frequently associated with the so-called "hard-sell" school. In contrast, as the structure of the advertising message loosens, the patterning is more likely to be supplied by the individual in line with previous experiences, attitudes, and so on. Often interpreted as "soft-sell" this message approach implies a frame-of-reference with internal factors intended to fill in the gaps intentionally or unintentionally left in the message structure.

Human psychological functioning is typically on the conceptual level.

Perhaps the most fundamental example of the interaction between "internal" and "external" factors in the frames-of-reference of every individual is the use of conceptual communication. Of course, animals communicate, machines communicate, and so on, but human conceptual communication is of a different order, and that's quite important to the understanding of advertising response.

Perhaps you remember the pivotal scene in the play or film "The Miracle Worker." The story dealt with the childhood of Helen Keller, who, though deprived of sight and hearing, overcame her handicaps to become a teacher of those with similar afflictions. In the play, her teacher, Anne Sullivan, had devised a touch alphabet that Helen could understand. But the significant breakthrough came when Helen was able to link "words" with the "things" they represented. When feeling water from a pump and feeling her teacher press out the letters for "water," she realized that the "word" was supposed to "stand for" the thing. From that moment she could communicate about water without having to show it or touch it. How important this distinction is, and how readily we take it for granted. It is, in a major way, what makes man different. As anthropologist Loren Eiseley observes with a touch of awe,

"Man...escaped out of the eternal present of the animal world into a knowledge of past and future."⁶ And so, today, our actions and thoughts about morality, ethical behavior, and so on, are strongly influenced by collections of symbols called letters collected into other symbols called words that form of "human rights," "liberty," "equality of opportunity," "freedom," and on and on.

Now, the problem with this marvelous human capacity is simply that since the word is not the thing, and since people through their ever changing frames-of-reference are different, words do not always have the same meaning for the receiver of the communication as they do for the sender. As Don Fabun puts it in his wise and witty book, Communications: The Transfer of Meaning:

When we act as if we believed that a word symbol is the event that was originally experienced, we ignore all the steps that have made it something else....

Common words cannot possibly have meanings in themselves - only people can have meanings.⁷

Now, obviously some words are more "structured" than others, thus limiting our capacity for mis-interpretation. "Tetrahedron," for example, is somewhat difficult to argue about. Ah, but advertisers are usually trying to persuade. And in the process they usually employ words that cajole, suggest, flavor, (and are usually less structured) and hope that their meaning is also our meaning. Do all of these recent advertising messages

⁶The Immense Journey, p. 120.

⁷Fabun, op cit., p. 19. Emphasis added.

Howard Johnson's Loves you.

At Shakey's, we love you.

Label of love. Stroh's beer.

The Gift of Love. Lincoln National Life Insurance

Bolla (Wine) is a little like love.

Love letters from France.

B & G Wines.

Love for sale, Amaretto di Saronno.

The rare liqueur of love.

If you don't love us, you have a year to return us.
Remington Shaver.

To ski us is to love us.
Sugarbush Inn.

This book loves you.

The Joy of Sex.

What the world needs now is "LOVE" -
the now look in plush shag by Sears.

Why buy from a stranger - you have a
friend in the family. Family Stores.

The consumer's friend since
1954. FredMart.

A good friend of the family.
The American Automobile Association.

You have a friend at Chase Manhattan.

Ask a friend at Home Federal.

Meet a friend. At New York Life...

A little help from my friends.
Percy H. Goodwin Company⁸

⁸Ralph Keyes, "Love Bug Bite Rise," More, Feb. 1977, p. 33.

Examine any advertisement, from the TV commercial destined for mass audiences, to the highly technical message intended for the specialized readers of Oil and Gas Journal. The advertisers are using words with the expectations that they will evoke the kind of response ("linkage" if you will) that the writers intended. As we have seen, the very nature of conceptual communication makes this a challenging (and potentially frustrating) task.

If words are the most common symbols used in communication, they are scarcely the only ones. We communicate by gesture, by body movement of one sort or another. You may have had the experience of misinterpreting the body movement of another. A nod of the head could mean "Come here." It could also mean "I have a sore neck." Advertisers, of course, must be sensitive to such "body language."

We communicate by color. Generally, within a given culture, colors will tend to have common meanings. In our culture, for example, blues and greens are considered restful colors; red and orange, hot or active colors; black for mourning. (In India, white is the color for mourning.) The selection of colors "saying" the right things is increasingly important in the package design, as well as the advertising messages for magazines, television, billboards, direct mail, etc.

Of course we communicate through time (keeping someone waiting "says" something to them) as well as space (the boss's office is bigger than mine). Even silence communicates, as each of us is probably painfully aware.

Edward T. Hall has called many of these non-verbal communication forms the "silent languages."⁹ They are part of the advertiser's communication

⁹The Silent Language, Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1966.

tools. Like words, they are powerful (but imprecise) predictors of advertising response.

Thus, the phenomenon of conceptual communication makes advertising (and every other form of mass communication) possible. Yet, at the same time, it makes the response to advertising messenger uncertain, due to the many possible interactions of the external symbols (both verbal and non-verbal) with the internal factors at work within each individual at any particular moment. Alas, "love" may not mean the same thing to all of us, all the time.

Various factors in the frame-of-reference have different relative weights. In recent years, a "good" football team at the University of Illinois would be one that had a winning season. Yet the same won-lost record at such football giants as Alabama, Notre Dame, Texas, or Penn State would describe only "an off season" or a "building year." Why the differences in evaluation? Largely because of the different reference points that are being used. In some "primitive" societies, the passing of the seasons is noted by the "anchor" (enduring reference point) of the scents of different blooming flowers. In our culture, our reference point is more frequently a calendar, or the activities of schools, or retail merchants. In other words, our frames-of-reference at any given moment are influenced by factors that have the greatest relative "weight." For many of us, for example, all future winter experiences will be evaluated by the standards of particular memories in the "winter of '78."

One result of this anchoring phenomenon is the so-called "assimilation/contrast" effects. Simply, if an individual's reference point (or anchor) is deeply held on a controversial issue, all subsequent communications about that issue tend to be evaluated from that reference point.

Those that seem relatively close are "assimilated" - perceived as being closer to the individual's own position than they may objectively be. But those that are perceived negatively are "contrasted" - perceived as being farther away from the individual's position than they may be. Thus, an individual who feels strongly about (say) forced bussing of school children, might well think of someone who was neutral on the issue as being "against" them. So it is also that evaluations of who "won" each of the Ford/Carter debates was found to be strongly dependent upon the person's preference before each of the debates.¹⁰

This assimilation/contrast effect can, of course, be quite important with the advertising of producers, government, special interest groups, etc., increasingly directed toward presenting views on such controversial issues as the environment and energy policy. This "controversy advertising," as it is called by Albert Stridsberg in a world-wide study by the International Advertising Association,¹¹ is often directed toward sympathetic audiences (i.e., those likely to "assimilate" the position) but must also frequently attempt to persuade those whose point of view is at least neutral and possibly opposed to the position advocated. It is not surprising, of course, that strong assimilation/contrast effects may be more evident with a newspaper ad concerning the rights of homosexuals than a message for a laundry detergent.

"Anchors," then, can work either for or against advertisers. They may in some cases be formidable influences in advertising ego-involving communications, yet may be of little influence in matters of small concern to the

¹⁰Kim Rotzoll and Spencer Tinkham, "The Ford/Carter Debates: A Sherifian Perspective," 1978 ICA convention paper.

¹¹New York: Hastings House, 1977.

individual. Thus a strong "anchor" in support of "free enterprise" could be significant in evaluating a message calling for more government control of energy resources. On the other hand, a feeling that "It really doesn't matter what detergent I buy," suggests the absence of a strong anchor and the likelihood that the individual may be more influenced by transient external influences such as sales, etc.

Anchors may refer to different levels of experience. For example, some consumers have developed "buying strategems" that they frequently use as anchors in their consumer purchasing activities. For example:

- . "You get what you pay for."
- . "Always buy store brands."
- . "Always buy name brands."
- . "Buy the cheapest you can find."

These (and others) may strike a familiar chord. Obviously if they serve as serious reference points in the individual's operating frame-of-reference they will have significant effect on the likely reception of some kinds of advertising and the likely rejection of others.

Cultural anchors can also affect the likelihood the advertising will be favorably received. For example, even with Pelé's heroic efforts, an ad urging attendance at a soccer match is likely to be dismissed by many Americans simply because (at least at this time) soccer is not considered a significant part of the American cultural conception of spectator sports. (Even though it is apparently the world's most popular sports attraction.) Some American firms advertising "convenience" products (e.g., prepared cake mixes) in other countries have run afoul of cultural anchors that place strong emphasis on foods prepared "from scratch." Cultural anchors are, of course, of increasing concern as more and more American firms advertise their goods and services overseas.

Brand preference anchors are basically what most advertisers are striving to implant. The idea that the firm will be able to establish its brand as the reference point from which all others are judged (and hopefully found wanting) is a very appealing idea to the advertiser.

Critics, however, contend that large firms with large advertising budgets are able to achieve this desirable end simply through sheer advertising weight, and then pursue their advantage by "behaving monopolistically." Once the brand is established in the consumer's consciousness, they contend, smaller competitors with worthy products find it much more difficult to break through the "patterning" resulting from the deeply entrenched brand anchor. On the contrary, advertisers respond, if such an anchor is established, it is only because the advertising has correctly interpreted the want-satisfying qualities of the product or service to the individual to the ultimate benefit of both seller and buyer.

There can be little doubt that names such as Campbell's, Coke, and (in industrial products) Caterpillar, serve as anchors to many. Interestingly, "underdog" advertisers have used the relatively entrenched positions of "Number One" to their advantage. In so doing they are starting "where the individual is" in terms of communication reference points, by associating their product with the operating anchor. Thus Avis says, "We're only number 2," 7-Up positions itself as the "un-cola," and so on. Agency research executive Lawrence Light observed that this strategy seems likely to succeed when:

- (1) your competitor's stature is greater than yours.
- (2) there is a large bloc of "undecided" consumers and little brand loyalty.
- (3) you have a built-in product advantage.¹²

¹²Advertising Age, March 4, 1977.

Perhaps the anchor most likely to affect reception of advertising message is actual experience with the product or service. Simply, if you try a particular underarm deodorant and it irritates your skin, subsequent ads championing its mildness are apt to be viewed with well-deserved disdain. Perhaps children get their first real taste of disillusion in relation to advertising when that wonderful product they see advertised in such exotic settings on television seems quite ordinary indeed in their crowded family room.

Of course favorable experience with a product or service may be one of the strongest reasons behind the already mentioned tendency for many ads to attract those who already use the advertised item. Satisfied with our stereo, we nod assent to the words in the ad. Yes, we agree, that store does try to make its customers "feel at home," and so on. This hope of establishing a favorable anchor is behind the frequent use of "sampling" by some firms. By actually giving the product or service to the customer to try, they are hopeful of establishing their brand as a favorable reference point for future purchase situations.

An interesting facet of actual experience with the product is the concept of the "self-fulfilling prophecy." In relation to advertising, it could be interpreted something like this. Since brands of many product classes (e.g., cigarettes, beers, detergents, gasolines) are virtually identical in terms of their physical properties, the "differences" (i.e., structure) that people experience with their use is strongly influenced by the packaging, advertising "images," etc. Thus, if someone believes a particular cigarette is more "masculine" than another, he may well perceive appropriately masculine qualities in the actual use of the product. Any number of tests (such as the beer test mentioned earlier in the paper) have been conducted that support this contention

that, for some products, the actual experience of the product in use may have been affected by the advertising rather than the actual experience with the product affecting future evaluation of the advertising. (This is no less true in other realms of activity, of course. Sufficiently conditioned by movie or drama critics concerning the virtues of a particular film, we "see" a masterpiece largely because we expected to.)

It has been contended by commentators such as Galbraith that one of the prime reasons that advertisements themselves frequently assume dominant weight in many individuals' frames-of-reference is simply because of our country's overall affluence. Thus, this type of reasoning goes, since most of us have sufficient resources to make purchases well beyond any pressing "needs," continued purchases have "diminishing marginal utility" - they simply don't mean all that much to us. Given his general perception, then, we are quite willing (even eager) to let advertisers seduce us. In short, we are likely to become more persuasible as we become more affluent, with external influences such as advertising assuming greater weight.

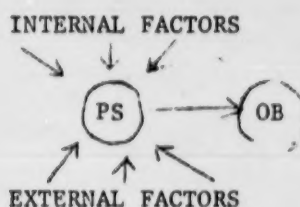
Not so, contend the supporters. In an abundant society, advertising increasingly plays the role of interpreting the want-satisfying qualities of a cornucopia of products and services for individuals. Rather than being led passively down the consumption path, consumers will respond to advertising as a dominant weight only when it corresponds with some need or important want perceived by the individual.

Once again, controversies about advertising turn on different assumptions about consumer response to the advertising message.

RESPONSES TO ADVERTISING: A SUMMARY

This paper posed the question, "What factors affect response to ads?"

The initial response should now be - "many" - both inside and outside the individual. The concept of the "frame-of-reference" was introduced to offer a potentially useful perspective of the interworkings of internal and external stimuli, including advertising.



The concept forces us to reassert the complexity of the variables affecting advertising response, such that any sweeping statements of predictability must be viewed with (to be charitable caution.)

Basically, advertisers are interested in affecting two types of overt behavior. The first is attending to the advertising message itself. The second is that moment of behavior ultimately intended by the ad, whether it be writing your congressman, placing an order for a carload of chemicals, or picking up a pack of gum at the supermarket check-out lane. Both moments of behavior depend upon the "right" combination of internal and external factors.

In the first case, the task concerns getting the individual to select a particular stimulus (the ad) from an external environment laden with competing stimuli (perhaps other people, noise, other ads, etc.) The astute advertiser must, of course, not only attract attention away from the competition, but also deliver a message. Generally, in order to accomplish both tasks, the message (with some degree of structure) must in some way be perceived as harmonious with factors within the individual such as familiarity with the product class (and perhaps the brand), a favorable predisposition toward the promises

made, and so on, at that particular moment in time.

In the case involving the action intended by the message, the ad itself is usually no longer present in the external field, but now may have become an operating anchor, as its message is remembered and considered relevant enough to lead to the intended form of action at that particular moment in time.

The challenge of all this is that we are dealing with people. And people are...well...people. They communicate with verbal symbols called words and a whole host of non-verbal symbols as well. Because of different experiences on the part of the senders and the receivers, these symbols can (and often do) mean different things to different people at different times under different frames-of-reference.

The frame-of-reference offers a perspective from which to examine advertising response. If it suggests extreme complexity, so be it. Advertising response is inexact. And that's one of the factors that makes advertising so interesting.

This material, in somewhat altered form, will appear as a chapter in the 10th edition of Sandage, Fryberger, and Rotzoll, Advertising Theory and Practice, to be published by Richard D. Irwin in January, 1979.